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The President's Stag Program

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By Peter Wyden

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Post-Dispatch

Without Precedent in Country's History

few singing partners on his pre-
afternoon when Margaret Truman
guests. Miss Truman will play the

WASHINGTON, Jan. 15.

AMONG the social innovations of the Eisenhower administration, the most intriguing and least understood is the presidential stag party. About 600 guests from all over the country have attended 37 of these White House affairs and the President plans to continue them. Impossible to crash and scrupulously private except for unadorned announcements of the carefully restricted guest lists, the stags have become a national institution.

Who gets invited to these off-the-record dinners? What is discussed at them? What influence do the parties have on the President? How does he keep them informal?

These questions are worth answering because the stags, unlike most "new" developments in Washington, are without precedent. They bear no resemblance, for instance, to the care-free male gatherings of the same name which wives who lack contact with the White House traditionally suffer in greater or lesser silence. Or to such exclusive but professionally political assemblies of presidential cronies as Andrew Jackson's kitchen cabinet, Theodore Roosevelt's tennis cabinet, Herbert Hoover's medicine ball cabinet, Franklin Roosevelt's brain trust or Harry Truman's Missouri friends.

The stags are pure Eisenhower. In less than two years they have acquired the pattern of a ritual, each step carefully

All-Male Dinners Have Become a National Institution
With Guests Attending From All Sections of the Country

Piastro's Symphonette program on KMOX at 1 this afternoon.

Edgar Bergen's guest on KMOX at 8 tonight will be Gypsy Rose Lee.

"Increase Your Happiness by Your Thoughts" will be the topic of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale on KSD's Art of Living at 8:45 this morning. At 9:30 on KSD, Dr. Ralph Sockman will be heard on National Radio Pulpit on "Go and Chance." On KSD's Catholic Hour at 10:15 tonight "Three Roads to God" will be the topic of the Rev. Joseph F. Manton.

GREATEST * * * STORY. GEORGE JESSEL at 4:30 this afternoon will tell the story of two Galilean children whose pure faith leads to a miracle.

Speakers on KMOX's Church of the Air this morning will be the Rev. Gerrit T. Vandenberg, president of the general synod of the Reformed Church in America, at 9 o'clock, and the Very Rev. Francis J. Connolly, dean of the School of Sacred Theology at the Catholic University of America, at 9:30.

"Don't Be Discouraged" will be the sermon topic of the Rev. Paul G. Stephan on The Lutheran Hour on KWK at 11:30 this morning and KFUE at 2:30 this afternoon.

GEORGE JESSEL in a program on KSD at 6 this evening will review 50 years in show business.

The St. Louis Story on KMC at 12:30 today will be about the Automobile Dealers Association. A religious program at 7.



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"I suggest that we meet at the White House about half past seven, have a reasonably early dinner and devote the evening to a general chat. While I am hopeful that you can attend, I realize that you already may have engagements which would interfere. If so, I assure you of my complete understanding. I shall probably wear a dinner coat, but a business suit will be entirely appropriate. With warm personal regards . . ."

CHANCES are excellent that you won't turn down the invitation (nobody ever has); that you'll show up on the dot "You're just not late for the President of the United States," says an aid; and that you will wear a dinner jacket. Every guest has worn one with the one exception of a presidential acquaintance who turned up in Washington unexpectedly and without dinner clothes and was invited at the last moment.

As you enter the White House through the center door, your name is checked against the guest list and you are shown a chart with seating arrangements so you won't have to hunt for your place at the dinner table. In his upstairs study, the President welcomes you at the door and introduces you to other guests. "You may not know anyone personally, but at least several of the faces will look familiar and some of the names will be out of the newspaper headlines. Almost at once, you will be on a first-name basis with everybody but the host.

"Although it was certainly the most distinguished small group I've ever been with, within minutes I felt quite as comfortable as I would with my own friends," one of the distinguished guests recalls. The President loosens things up adroitly by moving from group to group, maybe explaining the paintings (including some of his own), his swords and other mementoes which cover the walls.

Dinner is at eight o'clock in the State Dining Room. Your name is hand-lettered on a gold-embroidered place card bearing the presidential seal. Next to it lies a small, brown pen knife, probably with the initials "D.D.E." and the current month and year on the main blade. A shiny penny is attached to another card nearby. Before you and the 12 to 21 other diners sit down, Mr. Eisenhower reminds you of the ancient superstition that a cutting-edge gift must never be accepted without token payment. This custom reaches back to an old English proverb ("Do not make a present of a knife for it will cut love") and the President takes it seriously.

"You've got to give me the penny back," he says.

THIS always gets a good laugh and the pennies are tossed to the host across the table, which is rectangular. The President never sits at the head but always at the center of one side, as at Cabinet meetings, to permit free flow of a single conversation.

The President doesn't get all his pennies back. Some guests hold on to them quietly, as souvenirs and the night when Laurence, David and Winthrop Rockefeller were on hand, one of them announced that the Rockefellers never give money back. Amid chuckling all around, he put his penny in his pocket.

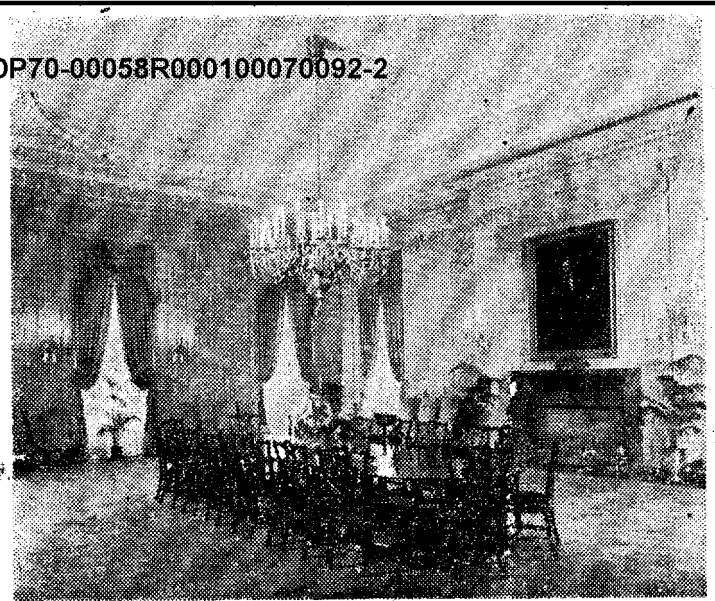
The presidential stags are not immune to mishaps. If you had been present during one certain evening, you would have watched a guest tip his chair back in the study until it collapsed under him. Shortly afterward, the same man had the identical experience with his dining room chair. Since he was unhurt, the double freak accident blew up the last remnants of formality in new rounds of laughter.

Your dinner fare will be about the same as that of your fellow-guests at preceding stags. It was picked by the President as a meal for men. Its piece de resistance is Texas chuckers, a broad-breasted Texas-raised game bird like the Himalayan pheasant, and wild rice. There will also probably be turtle soup, salmon, light wine, green salad, apple pie or ice cream.

If you're out of luck, you may discover—as did our presidents far into history—that mass cookery is unpredictable, even in the White House. Some stag guests, whose stomachs encountered one of the kitchen's off-nights, noted the less-than-gourmet-worthy preparation of the President's dinner. ("He'll do something about it," one old Ike man says loyally). But their attention is quickly diverted to color photos of a chucker in natural glory. ("This is the bird you'll be eating," says the President) and the main business of the evening: conversation.

THE atmosphere is right. Wives are kept away because their presence, by White House tradition, would turn the stags into starchy state affairs. Foreign diplomats are not invited because protocol demands that asking one ambassador necessitates eventually asking all. Smoking, normally taboo until after dinner, is permissible at any stage of the stag.

The company also reflects the purposes of the host which are, as you may have guessed, more than purely social. Mr. Eisenhower uses the stags to relax from the tensions of his job and to speak without having his words quoted and weighed around the world. The dinners serve him as a sort of private Gallup poll on the nation's thinking as reported by old friends and others who, almost without exception, wish him well. Then, the stags are balloon launching platforms where the President can test-run ideas on audiences marked for discretion and an absence of "yes men."



—Harris and Ewing Photograph.
DINING ROOM AT THE WHITE HOUSE WHERE THE STAG DINNERS ARE HELD.

Finally, they let him pierce the loneliness of the world's toughest job and provide an outlet for his natural gregariousness. This, plus her distant acquaintance with all-male functions which Ike attended during his Army days, make the stags welcome to Mamie Eisenhower, too.

Your fellow-diners may have flown in for the evening from anywhere in the nation. Their professional pre-occupations and backgrounds vary as widely as their politics. By far the largest contingent comes from the ranks of business, including a Who's Who of important corporations (Harlow H. Curtice of General Motors, Benjamin F. Fairless of U.S. Steel, Leroy A. Lincoln of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., etc.). But there has been an occasional seasoning with big wheels from labor (CIO's Walter Reuther, AFL's George Meany, UMW's John L. Lewis, etc.), one of whom—unnamed here—reportedly said no more than 10 words all evening.

Newspaper and magazine publishers and Cabinet members have mingled with little-known attorneys, automobile dealers, hotel managers and others who can be expected to have their fingers on some segment of the public pulse and purse. Musical notables like Fred Waring, Irving Berlin and Arthur Godfrey have been there. So have university presidents like Princeton's Dr. Harold W. Dodds and Columbia's Dr. Grayson Kirk; Hollywood lights like Darryl Zanuck and George Murphy; religious figures like Francis Cardinal Spellman and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver; and sports headlines like Earl Blaik and Lou Little.

Some of the most famous men come stiff with awe and never do relax. "They come all choked up and leave all choked up," says one sympathetic White House assistant who has been a guest himself. "The idea, I'm having dinner with the President at the

As you glance around the table, however, you will note that tongue-tied guests are few. Most of those who have been present mixed widely and well: Golf Pro Ed Dudley with Spy Boss Allen Dulles, for instance; J. P. Morgan's George Whitney with the United Steelworkers' David McDonald; Bishop Fulton J. Sheen with top men from General Motors and Hart, Schaffner & Marx; Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt with Marty Snyder, the president's war-time mess sergeant who now runs a boneless turkey business.

ST. LOUIS area guests have included David R. Calhoun Jr., president, St. Louis Union Trust Co.; Charles A. Thomas, president Monsanto Chemical Co.; Arthur K. Atkinson, president, Wabash Railroad; Willard R. Cox, president, Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of St. Louis; George C. Hannaway, vice president, T. J. Moss Tie Co.; Powell B. McHaney, General American Life Insurance Co.; John M. Olin and Spencer T. Olin, executives of Olin Mathieson Chemical Corp., East Alton, Ill.; Marion L. J. Lambert, board chairman, Gale & Co.; Barak T. Mattingly, attorney and former G.O.P. national committeeman from Missouri; James S. McDonnell Jr., president of McDonnell Aircraft Corp., and Roscoe C. Hobbs, president of Hobbbs-Western Co. and active in Republican and St. Louis civic affairs.

What sort of talk would you hear among these men? The answers to this question must be limited. Nobody wants to invade what little privacy a President has left. And guests who talk about their stag dinner experiences at all naturally do so only with the understanding that they won't be identified. This much can be said:

The President has been amazingly frank about his occasional frustrations. One night, cussing the Lincoln portrait in the State Dining Room one night, he remarked that he'd been reading up on Lincoln and found that even the great emancipator had to make political compromises. Another time he noted his discovery that there are only two kinds of years for Presidents—the year before election, when somebody always thought up reasons why you shouldn't try something, and election years, when you couldn't do much of anything.

After about an hour and a half at dinner, the party moves back to the study for coffee, cordials, cigars, highballs, and more talk. Nothing is too controversial for the conversational diet. Some guests deliberately restrained themselves from bringing up Senator Joseph McCarthy when he was the hottest subject in the capital and at least once the President begged off from this troubled topic. Other times, he expressed himself as frankly on the junior Senator from Wisconsin as he does on foreign policy, taxes, defense, public power, or the latest crises fresh in the news that evening.

The President sometimes questions guests at length: How is business in their area? Why don't more young people get into the G.O.P.? How about electing the House of Representatives only in presidential years to eliminate mid-term unrest?

The guests may fire questions back at him: Why doesn't he give more TV talks to sell his program to the country? Why do we spend so much on atomic development and is it worth it? Will there be war in Indochina? Will France ever get a truly stable government? What do the Russians really want? Is the right to dissent being curbed in America?

Sometimes the President dominates the talk with briefings, perhaps about NATO's role in western defense. Other evenings he might be thoughtfully slumped in an easy chair, balancing a coffee cup or a highball glass on his knee. If he is just back from the golf course and full of pep, he may talk a good deal, slapping his thigh for emphasis. He never gives the impression that he is pumping his guests, but he often throws a phrase or question into a discussion. The warmer it gets, the better he likes it.

Says the witness of one argument:

"The give and take involved one man who I thought was trying to show how much he knew. If the man had been my guest, I'd have changed the subject. But the President stayed on the subject till he finally backed the man down. I liked that."

Many of the famous guests, of course, are top authorities in their fields. John W. Davis, the great constitutional lawyer, has discussed the Bricker amendment

at a stag dinner; Harvard's Nathan Pusey talked on the meaning of education; Chrysler's K. T. Keller discussed guided missiles; Frank Leahy talked football, which caused Ike to recall some of the incidents of his own football days at West Point.

Guests frequently are astonished at the amount of information stored in the President's mind. "I thought I knew a lot about the question," says a guest, recalling a presidential estimate of foreign trade problems, "but the President talked 20 or 25 minutes and covered the field so thoroughly that I felt inspired to work harder among businessmen."

Sometimes guests lighten their host's burden with jokes (though no off-color stories, which the President is known to abhor). Once, after sighing over White House headaches, he was told about the Japanese train passenger who slapped his two sons and was threatened with "trouble" by a fellow-passenger.

"You no can make trouble for me," said the Japanese. "In baggage car up front my wife is in a long box. She dead. In sleeping car way back my daughter she having baby. No can find husband. Pogo here swallowed ticket. Conductor say I'm on wrong train. No, lady, you no can make trouble for me!"

The assemblage roared.

* * *

OCCASIONALLY, toward the end of the evening, the President guides his guests through the White House, perhaps telling how the chandelier in the Blue Room was cut down to blend in with the rest of the decor, or how he entered the White House for the first time in 1940 as an unknown officer with a message for President Roosevelt. On these tours the President also has been heard to compliment Mr. Truman on the face-lifting of the mansion during the latter's term.

Once, taking a group through the Lincoln room, Ike pointed out that the Lincolns rarely used the huge bed that still dominates the chamber. Hollywood's Sam Goldwyn got a laugh by pointing to the telephone and inquiring: "Did they ever use this?"

Washington parties close down early by tradition and it has never been too hard to end the stags between 11 p.m. and midnight, although the President rarely moves to break them up. Once, he slapped his thigh and said:

"Golly, I guess tomorrow's a work day for you as well as me, so we'd better break this up." But usually a guest says, "We shouldn't keep the President up," or, "You've been kind to us, Mr. President, but I know you want to get to bed."

Sometimes the President suggests "one for the road." Other evenings, he walks his guests to the door, perhaps with his arm around the shoulders of a proud friend who purchased a new dinner jacket especially for the occasion, and waves his company off.

Until recently, there were few professional politicians at the stags, but last month a new note was sounded. The guests were frankly picked for their political potency in the Republican party. They discussed ways of moulding the G.O.P. in the President's "moderate progressive" image and how to push along some of the party's fresh young faces. Guests at the most recent stag, Monday night, included former Gov. Thomas E. Dewey of New York and Leonard W. Hall, chairman of the National Republican Committee. Word in Washington is that there will be an entire series of stags at which the President will explain his plans for the party.